

CESAR'S LAST FAST
a film directed by Richard Ray Perez



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Los Angeles - Laemmle's Playhouse 7

English and Spanish with English subtitles
Documentary
2013
100 minutes,
color & b/w,
U.S.A.

<http://cesarslastfast.com/> :: @CesarsLastFast

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

CEGAR'S LAST FAST is an insightful documentary film about the intense sacrifice and deep spiritual conviction behind Cesar Chavez's life-long struggle for the humane treatment of America's farm workers, and the untold chapter in the story of civil rights in America.

In

LONG SYNOPSIS

In the summer of 1988 Cesar Chavez, then 61 years old, embarked on a water-only fast – a personal act of penance for not having done enough to stop growers from spraying toxic pesticides on farm workers. For more than a month no one, including Cesar, knew when he would eat again. Structured around dramatic, never-before-seen footage of Chavez's "Fast for Life," **CEGAR'S LAST FAST** is the inspiring but overlooked 40-year story of how Chavez organized America's poorest, least educated workers, built a movement that successfully challenged our nation's powerful agribusiness, and launched the modern day Latino civil rights movement in the U.S. Motivated by Catholic social teaching, Chavez risked his life in pursuit economic justice for America's most vulnerable workforce.

CEGAR'S LAST FAST follows Chavez's struggle for the humane treatment of America's farm workers. The documentary shares a first look into Chavez's 1988 "Fast for Life," a 36 day water-only fast, a dramatic act of penance for not having done enough to protect laborers from harmful pesticides that were continuously used in the fields.

Director Richard Ray Perez makes sure that, whenever possible, Cesar tells his own story. Culled from hundreds of hours of rarely heard interviews, Cesar's voice narrates the story and examines his own commitment from his point-of-view. Contemporary interviews with people who surrounded Chavez in 1988 include: Dolores Huerta, Martin Sheen, Luis Valdez, Cesar's brother Richard Chavez, and Cesar's son, Paul Chavez, among others. These interviews are powerful, highly emotional testimonies to Cesar Chavez's impact on the Civil Rights movement; and an urgent call to participate in social justice and human rights activism.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In the summer of 2006 I received a phone call from filmmaker Lorena Parlee. She heard that I was interested in making a documentary about Cesar Chavez because I had posted a message on a listserv for librarians to look for footage of Cesar. I had started research on the story until I learned that another filmmaker was already working on a documentary project about Cesar. Lorena called and told me that she was that other filmmaker.

Lorena had collected about 85 hours of Chavez-related footage for this project; 16 hours of which had never been seen by the public – material she had collected when she worked as Cesar's press secretary in the late 1980s. Much of this material was collected during the last major fast of Cesar's life when, as Cesar's press secretary, she had unprecedented access to shoot some very intimate footage of Cesar. She started shooting on the 23rd day of the fast, and shot every day until Cesar broke his fast on the 36th day.

Then when Cesar passed away, the Chavez family invited her to shoot home video of the Chavez family preparing for Cesar's burial service. Lorena arrived with a consumer video camera and shot footage of Cesar's brother Richard building Cesar's coffin – a simple pine box as Cesar requested years prior. Lorena also shot the Chavez family's private rosary, wake and the family's private burial service. Ultimately when they buried his body, she had very special footage of the grandchildren helping to put dirt on the coffin. I was impressed by the description of this footage. Lorena added that this footage had never been by the public because she'd been holding it back for her film.

This inspired a long conversation about Cesar, his work and my family's farmworker history. We also talked about filmmaking in general and we developed a feeling of trust and mutual respect. Lorena told me that she had been working on the project for 10 years, mostly by herself, and she was looking for a collaborator to help her finish the project. She asked me join her as a producer, and she would continue to serve as the film's director. I was very interested, but I had just started my first director-for-hire job, a commitment that was to last six months. I told her I would love to join her, but I wasn't available until after I finished this other job.

She then explained that she needed to find someone to help her immediately because she was being treated for breast cancer, and she could only work on the film two weeks per month. I was shaken by this news. Inspired to help, I reiterated that I was very interested in helping after my 6-month commitment was finished and that I would work for deferred payment or pro bono to help complete her film. She said that if in 6 months she hadn't found someone to help, she would call me.

Six months passed and I didn't hear from her so I assumed she found someone else to work on the project. Then nine months after that, I received a phone call from a man named Donn Crail, who introduced himself as Lorena Parlee's step-father. He told me that Lorena died last month of breast cancer and she had left my name and contact information in her notes for Lorena's mother and him to contact immediately to see if I would finish her film. He added that she trusted the conversation that I had had with her the year before, and she wanted to leave the documentary in my hands.

I was incredibly moved by her act of her leaving her documentary for me to finish. When Donn asked if I wanted to take the project, I thought of my family and my connection to Chavez, and I signed on immediately.

A few months later I reviewed the footage. I began to see a very compelling story about Cesar Chavez's spiritual commitment to his work and embodied by his 1988 fast. The story that seemed most powerful to me was different than the direction that Lorena had started. So I returned to Helen and Donn Crail, Lorena's mother and stepfather, and told them that I saw a story centered on Cesar's spiritual commitment to his work. They trusted my idea, and agreed to let me make the film that would become *Cesar's Last Fast*.

When I finally started the film, I had to approach the film with a blank slate, beginning again with the footage that Lorena Parlee had left behind. Her collection covered 85 hours of footage spread over 300 tapes. I shot another 30 hours, including interviews and footage of farm workers and organizers in the fields today. I then focused on the segments that illustrated his spiritual journey, as well as the material that showed the struggles of the United Farm Workers as a movement.

Searching for these segments in such a large archive is a needle in a haystack challenge. I worked closely with the editors to make sure we reviewed all of the content so that we would not miss a critical image that could help propel the story. It was a fascinating process of discovery, and a challenge to assemble in a creative and compelling narrative.

To tell this story – and because I started after Cesar died – I relied a lot on archival footage and interviews with him. We amassed many hours of interviews and news footage of Chavez. The wonderful thing about this story is that it integrates his voice in a way that hasn't been done before. We heard Cesar's voice more than anybody else's, and I'm proud that we present to the audience Cesar's thoughts and feelings directly.

Additionally I wanted to interview people who were very closely associated with Cesar – people who knew him intimately, people who knew him for years, people who can go through many of the struggles if not all of the farm workers struggles with him. I wanted to hear the story from their perspective to augment the story we

heard in Cesar's own voice. So I decided not to hear from experts or historians who have a third party perspective, but focus only on people who were close to Cesar and use Cesar's own words.

In my research, I discovered that Cesar Chavez was not a perfect human being. He was human, and had human flaws that had repercussions on members of the movement that he helped build. It was tough because all I knew about Chavez until that point was about the great things he had done – the struggles he led and eventually won. I didn't know about the internal conflict of the movement, which many in the movement blame on him. There are many former members of the movement and former members of the union staff who were very hurt and even angry or resentful of Cesar. My challenge then became how to incorporate these difficult perspectives into a story without letting that distort the underlying power of what he and the movement accomplished.

When I approached some of the people who had left the union on bad terms with Cesar, some of them were skeptical, and didn't want to grant an interview. As one interviewee put it, "I don't want to be part of another hagiographic portrait of Cesar." When I convinced him that I wanted to tell the full story of Cesar, including his flaws, I was able to secure that interview.

I encountered a number of difficulties making this film. The most immediate was to secure the funding. Resources and funding for documentary films are very limited, and the application process is very competitive. Early on, we got support from Lyn and Norman Lear through the Lear Family Foundation. Their foundation provided the seed money to launch the project; Lyn Lear ultimately joined the project as an executive producer. The Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program also helped as an early supporter.

But after we got that initial funding, we struggled for years to raise the money. We applied for every grant possible, but were awarded only a few smaller grants. Funders didn't recognize the value of a historical documentary like this – they viewed it simply as a past-tense story.

But the story I wanted to tell and the film that I ultimately made is relevant to today, both in terms of speaking to a new generation of Latinos in this country – many of whom arrived here after Cesar passed away – but also speaking to Millennial's who are unfamiliar with Cesar's story and could benefit from learning about this incredible figure who led a movement of essentially the poorest and least educated people in the country.

Even when I encountered these challenges, I was always focused on the goal: *To tell the whole and honest story of Cesar Chavez, an important leader in American history. And to tell it through those who were close to him.*

We eventually gained trust and cooperation from a variety of people who worked with Chavez. None of them have yet seen the final version so I don't know who will ultimately accept or agree with the perspective I present in the film. But that's a good place to be, because it supports the independent perspective I strove to preserve. I didn't want to try to please supporters and family, nor the critics, nor even the general public. I worked very hard to show an honest portrait of Chavez that is sincere and complete, one that resonates with my heart and my mind.

CESAR'S LAST FAST illustrates that by becoming part of a movement, we have the power to make a change. Chavez did it in the past, facing greater odds. It can be done again. I want audiences to see the capacity of an individual who can inspire a movement of people to fight injustice. I want the example of Cesar Chavez to convince people to continue to fight the growing income and power inequality of this country. It's easy to succumb to a sense of powerlessness, especially today as economic power is focused in the hands of a small percentage of the population.

Many people feel powerless in the face of organized corporate and political power; they feel like they don't have any power to address the growing inequality and unfairness in this country. I am hopeful that audiences will leave this film believing that by organizing, they have power to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

- Richard Ray Perez

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Martin Sheen: Actor

With his faith firmly rooted in non-violence, Martin Sheen may be best known for his peace actions, but he supports a myriad of charitable causes and social justice projects, as well as being an outspoken advocate to cure the plight of the homeless.

Luis Valdez: Writer/Director

From the migrant labor fields to Broadway, Luis Valdez remains true to his original vision... performance that addresses the Chicano experience in America in a context meaningful to all Americans. Valdez's credits include, founder & artistic director of the internationally renowned El Teatro Campesino, council member of the National Endowment of the Arts, and founding member of the California Arts Council.

His awards include, Presidential Medal of the Arts, the prestigious Aguila Azteca Award, Governors Award of the California Arts Council. Best known works: Zoot Suit, La Bamba, and Corridos, winner of the George Peabody Award.

Paul Chavez: Cesar's son

Paul Chavez serves as president and chairman of the board of the Cesar Chavez Foundation.

One of eight children of Cesar and Helen Chavez, Paul has spent his entire life with the movement. During the early 1960s, he accompanied his father as he began driving to Central Valley farm worker towns organizing his infant union, helping his dad hand out leaflets.

Richard Chavez: Cesar's brother

Richard Chavez was a skilled carpenter and building contractor. But in 1966, he left his job as a carpenter and committed himself to helping his brother Cesar build the organization that would become the United Farm Workers union.

Richard Chavez is credited with helping to build the Forty Acres complex in Delano, which became the union's headquarters. He worked as a union organizer, planning grape and lettuce boycotts as director of the Detroit, Mich., boycott in 1972-73 and the New York City boycotts in 1973-74. Richard Chavez was in charge of administering union contracts and oversaw union bargaining.

Dolores Huerta: Co-Founder of the United Farm Workers Union

Dolores Huerta has worked to improve social and economic conditions for farm workers and to fight discrimination. To further her cause, she created the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA) in 1960 and co-founded what would become the United Farm Workers (UFW). Huerta stepped down from the UFW in 1999, but she continues to her work to improve the lives of workers, immigrants and women.

She founded the Dolores Huerta Foundation to create leadership opportunities for community organizing, leadership development, civic engagement, and policy advocacy.

Chris Hartmire: Minister, California Migrant Ministry

Chris Hartmire lives in an activist church retirement community. He was active in the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) and continued until recently to serve on the NFWM board.

LeRoy Chatfield: United Farm Workers organizer

LeRoy Chatfield entered a Catholic monastic religious teaching order located in 1949. He completed his religious training at St. Mary's College in 1957 with a degree in philosophy. From 1957 to 1965, he taught in Catholic high schools in Bakersfield and San Francisco.

In 1965, he left religious life to join Cesar Chavez and his fledgling farmworker movement in Delano, California, where he remained active until the fall of 1973.

Marshall Ganz: United Farm Workers organizer, Harvard Kennedy School

Marshall Ganz is a lecturer at the Kennedy School at Harvard University and recently published *Why David Sometimes Wins*, a book based on his PhD dissertation about the early successes of the farm worker union.

Gilbert Padilla: United Farm Workers Union, secretary-treasurer

Gilbert Padilla began working with Cesar Chavez in 1955, joining the Community Service Organization. He helped start the National Farm Workers Association in 1962, and was active with the UFW until 1980.

Jerry Cohen: United Farm Workers General Council

In 1967, attorney Jerry Cohen began work at the California Rural Legal Assistance office, attracting the attention of César Chávez. Cohen became Chávez's personal attorney and general counsel of the UFW, directing the UFW legal department for the next 14 years. Cohen and his team of lawyers won numerous suits directed by and against the union including fights against using trespass laws to thwart union organizing.

Dr. Fidel Huerta: Cesar's physician

Dr. Fidel Huerta was the attending physician during Chavez's 1988 fast.

Marion Moses: Cesar's physician

Dr. Marion Moses was the attending physician during Chavez's 1968 fast, and a consulting physician during the 1988 fast.

CESAR CHAVEZ BIOGRAPHY

Cesar Estrada Chavez is one of the most important figures in American history. His name is synonymous with the struggle for justice for American farm workers, dignity for the nation's poor, and he is recognized as the most important leader of the Latino people in the United States.

Like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez was a deeply spiritual man. His religion and his devotion inspired his commitment to his non-violent pursuit of social justice.

Cesar's life as a community leader began in 1952 when he coordinated voter registration drives in Latino communities and conducted campaigns against racial and economic discrimination.

Subsequently, for more than three decades, Cesar led the first successful farm workers union in American history. Against previously insurmountable odds, he led successful strikes and boycotts that resulted in the first industry-wide labor contracts in the history of American agriculture. His union's efforts brought about the passage of the groundbreaking 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act to protect farm workers. Today, it remains the only law in the nation that protects the farm workers' right to unionize.

The significance and impact of Cesar's life transcends any one cause or struggle. He was a unique and humble leader who influenced and inspired millions of Americans to seek social justice and civil rights for the poor and disenfranchised in our society. Cesar forged a diverse and extraordinary national coalition of students, middle class consumers, trade unionists, religious groups, and minority communities.

A strong believer in the principles of nonviolence practiced by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar effectively employed peaceful tactics such as boycotts and strikes. But his most profound undertakings for the cause were inspired by his deep spirituality.

In 1966, under a banner that bore the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, he led farm workers on a 250-mile pilgrimage to the capital of California to demand that farm workers receive the basic rights afforded to other workers in America. In 1968 he embarked on a spiritual fast for 25 days to affirm his personal commitment and that of the farm labor movement to non-violence. He fasted again for 25 days in 1972, and in 1988, at the age of 61, he endured a 36-day "Fast for Life" to highlight the harmful impact of pesticides on farm workers and their children.

Cesar passed away in his sleep on April 23, 1993, in San Luis, Arizona, only miles from his birthplace 66 years earlier. More than 50,000 people attended his funeral

services in the small town of Delano, California, the same community in which he had planted his seed for social justice three decades before.

FILMMAKING TEAM

Richard Ray Perez Director/Producer/Executive Producer/Writer

Richard Ray Perez has a close personal connection to the issues presented in Cesar's Last Fast. For 22 years, Mr. Perez's father was a farm worker who lived in and worked under the conditions Cesar Chavez fought to end. At five years old Richard joined the historic grape boycott organized by the United Farm Workers.

In addition to his work on Cesar's Last Fast, Richard Ray Perez directed and/or executive produced 4 documentary film series for Brave New films: Sierra Club Chronicles (Director, 2006); Freedom Files, Season II (co-executive producer, 2007); In Their Boots (Executive Producer, 2008 – 2009); and Operation In Their Boots (Executive Producer, 2010). In Their Boots was nominated for a 2009 IDA award for best single-subject series. Mr. Perez also produced and directed the political documentary Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election which The Los Angeles Times called "a riveting story about the undermining of democracy in America." Unprecedented was an official selection at over 50 international film festivals, winner of nine festival awards and premiered on the Sundance Channel in 2004. Mr. Perez was also the director of photography for the Robert Greenwald documentaries, Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism and Uncovered: The War in Iraq. Mr. Perez earned a bachelor of the arts degree, cum laude, in Visual and Environmental Studies from Harvard, is a native of San Fernando, California, and lives in Los Angeles with his partner Gary Thompson.

Lorena Parlee, PhD Producer/Director

The late filmmaker Lorena Parlee began working on the film that was to become Cesar's Last Fast in 1986 when she volunteered with the United Farm Workers of America at La Paz, the UFW California Headquarters. That year Lorena also produced, directed and wrote The Wrath of Grapes, a UFW advocacy video depicting the effects pesticides have on agricultural workers and their families.

In 1988 Lorena was Cesar Chavez's press secretary and spokesperson when Cesar launched his Fast For Life. During Cesar's Chavez's fast, Ms. Parlee collected some of the most intimate and powerful footage shot of Cesar.

After working for Cesar Chavez, Lorena produced, directed and co-wrote the feature-length IMAX film "Mexico." Ms. Parlee also co-produced "Concerto for the Earth," a large-format 3D film, which was shown at the 1992 World's Fair Environmental Pavilion in Seville, Spain.

In addition to making films, Dr. Parlee was a Professor of Mexican and Chicano History at the University of California's Santa Barbara, Irvine and San Diego campuses.

Lorena Parlee died Aug. 18, 2006 after an extended battle with breast cancer. She was 60.

Molly O'Brien Producer/Executive Producer

For her work in film and television, Molly O'Brien was shortlisted for the Academy Awards in 1998 (A Pig With Hair, PBS), awarded a prime time Emmy in 2000 (American High, FoxTV), nominated for a primetime Emmy in 2001 (American High) and made a 2010 Sundance Institute Producing Fellow (Cesar's Last Fast). O'Brien has collaborated with some of the most distinguished members of the documentary community. She received initial training as assistant camera with Ken Burns (Frank Lloyd Wright and Lewis & Clark, PBS). As a producer and co-executive producer O'Brien worked with RJ Cutler (American High, FoxTV), Lauren Greenfield (Queen of Versailles, Magnolia Pictures), Diane Weyermann (Countdown to Zero, Participant Media), and Robert Greenwald (Sierra Club Chronicles, Sundance Channel). As a producer/director her clients have included: Zumba Fitness, XO Group, Natural Resources Defense Council, LA Philharmonic, Sierra Club, Feed America and The World Food Programme. O'Brien's work has broadcast on Sundance Channel, FOX TV, TLC, ABC Family, Oxygen Network, Bravo, LinkTV and PBS and has premiered at IDFA in Amsterdam, Full Frame Documentary Festival, Montreal, Chicago and CMJ film festivals among many others. O'Brien is a graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and is based in Los Angeles where as an adjunct professor of Wildlife and Environmental Film she recently discovered a love of teaching.

FULL CREDITS

In Memory of
Lorena Parlee: 1945 – 2006 &
Reyes H. Perez: 1917 – 1998

a Monkey Mind Media Production + LOGO

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Molly O'Brien
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Special Advisor
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Featuring

LeRoy Chatfield

Paul Chavez

Richard Chavez

Jerry Cohen

Marshall Ganz

Chris Hartmire

Dolores Huerta

Fidel Huerta

Marion Moses

Gil Padilla

Artruro Rodriguez

Martin Sheen

Luis Valdez